1981

For Ethel Rosenberg

Adrienne Rich

Follow this and additional works at: http://ir.uiowa.edu/iowareview

Part of the Creative Writing Commons

Recommended Citation

Available at: https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.2768
For Ethel Rosenberg · Adrienne Rich

convicted, with her husband, of "conspiracy to commit espionage"; killed in the electric chair June 19, 1953

Europe 1953:
throughout my random sleepwalk
the words
scratched on walls, on pavements
painted over railway arches
Liberez les Rosenberg!

Escaping from home I found
home everywhere:
the Jewish question, Communism

marriage itself
a question of loyalty
or punishment

my Jewish father writing me
letters of seventeen pages
finely inscribed harangues

questions of loyalty
and punishment
One week before my wedding

that couple gets the chair
the volts grapple her, don’t
kill her fast enough

Liberez les Rosenberg!
I hadn’t realized
our family arguments were so important

my narrow understanding
of crime of punishment
no language for this torment
mystery of that marriage
always both faces
on every front page in the world

Something so shocking so
unfathomable
it must be pushed aside

II

She sank however into my soul A weight of sadness
I hardly can register how deep
her memory has sunk that wife and mother
like so many
who seemed to get nothing out of any of it
except her children
that daughter of a family
like so many
need ing its female monster
she, actually wishing to be an artist
wanting out of poverty
possibly also really wanting
revolution
that woman strapped in the chair
no fear and no regrets
charged by posterity
not with selling secrets to the Communists
but with wanting to distinguish
herself being a bad daughter a bad mother

And I walking to my wedding
by the same token a bad daughter a bad sister
my forces focussed

on that hardly revolutionary effort
Her life and death the possible
ranges of disloyalty
so painful  so unfathomable
they must be pushed aside
ignored for years

III

Her mother testifies against her
Her brother testifies against her
After her death

she becomes a natural prey for pornographers
her death itself a scene
her body sizzling half-strapped whipped like a sail
She becomes the extremest victim
described nonetheless as rigid of will
what are her politics by then no one knows

Her figure sinks into my soul
a drowned statue
sealed in lead

For years it has lain there unabsorbed
first as part of that dead couple
on the front pages of the world the week

I gave myself in marriage
then slowly severing drifting apart
a separate death a life unto itself

no longer the Rosenbergs
no longer the chosen scapegoat
the family monster

till I hear how she sang
a prostitute to sleep
in the Women's House of Detention
Ethel Greenglass Rosenberg  would you have marched to take back the night collected signatures for battered women who kill What would you have to tell us would you have burst the net

IV

Why do I even want to call her up to console my pain  (she feels no pain at all) why do I wish to put such questions to ease myself  (she feels no pain at all she finally burned to death  like so many) why all this exercise  of hindsight? since if I imagine her at all I have to imagine first the pain inflicted on her by women her mother testifies against her her sister-in-law testifies against her and how she sees it not the impersonal forces not the historical reasons why they might have hated her strength If I have held her at arm’s length till now if I have still believed it was my loyalty, my punishment at stake if I dare imagine her surviving I must be fair to what she must have lived through I must allow her to be at last
political in her ways not in mine
her urgencies perhaps impervious to mine
defining revolution as she defines it

or, bored to the marrow of her bones
with "politics"
bored with the vast boredom of long pain

small; tiny in fact; in her late sixties
liking her room her private life
living alone perhaps

no one you could interview
maybe filling a notebook herself
with secrets she has never sold